

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON GIRLS' EDUCATION AND LEARNING IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

While the COVID-19 crisis has largely spared children from its devastating health effects, its impact on their education has been profound. Due to COVID-19, educational systems are severely impacted leading to the complete closure of nearly all schools, universities and colleges worldwide. The disruptions caused by it affect children across all countries but their impact was more severe for disadvantaged children, especially the girl child. The COVID-19 crisis disrupted early learning and formal education for them. Beyond impacts on learning, the unprecedented disruption caused by the pandemic school closures poses an immediate and long-term threat to gender equality and may have pernicious gender-specific effects in areas such as health, well-being and protection. Understanding these gender dynamics is a prerequisite to developing effective strategies to secure educational continuity and to promote gender equality. In this context, the present study focuses on understanding and documenting the immediate as well as long term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the education of children, especially the girl child and their learning opportunities. It also seeks to find out the discrimination against the girl child in terms of education and to understand the short and long-term consequences of COVID-19 on the education of girls.

Keywords: COVID-19, Education, Gender-Responsive, Girls, Pandemic, Remote Learning, School Closures.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 is not just a public health challenge but it has also disrupted the social systems and institutions and fragile immunity against social inequalities (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). The pandemic is having an impact on all sectors of society across the world but its impact does not fall equally (Goulds et al., 2020), as the women and girls were more affected during the pandemic (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). Though the COVID-19 pandemic is a once-in-a-century humanitarian crisis that has impacted the lives of millions of children worldwide, it has affected girls and young women disproportionately,

exacerbating gender inequalities in education (Save the Children, 2022). Education and growth are seen as key indicators for the development of the country. Education enables girls to participate in the growth of society and the family, as educated girls can participate in the political and economic decision-making at home as well as at the community level (Kaur, 2021). But adolescent girls and young women have been particularly vulnerable to the devastating consequences of COVID-19, and this is especially the case in India. In later adolescence, decisions are being made for girls about their futures, including their education and marriage. Research shows that when girls attend

secondary school, the incidence of child marriage, teenage pregnancy and poverty declines. Sadly, the pandemic has greatly limited girls' access to education (Gahlaut, 2021). The pandemic has a detrimental impact on family income which pulls them out of school and make matters worse (Goulds et al., 2020).

Nearly 130 million girls, about 1 in 10 of all the girls in the world, were already excluded from school before COVID-19 (Fancy, 2020). By March 2020, UNESCO reported nearly 3 million students across the world had their education disrupted due to COVID-19 after just 13 countries saw school closures (Witter, 2021) and by the end of April 2020, 186 countries have implemented nationwide school closures, affecting about 73.8% of the total enrolled learners (Kaul, 2021). While, by mid-May 2020, 194 countries instituted countrywide school closures affecting 91% of enrolled learners (Witter, 2021). At the peak of the global lockdowns, there was over 1.5 billion affected learners in 194 countries due to school closures (Save the Children, 2022, Fancy, 2020). In early December 2020, UNESCO was reporting that 314 million learners were impacted, that's 18% of total enrolled learners by nationwide school closures in 28 countries (Fancy, 2020). This school closure has led to a complete disconnect from education for the vast majority of children or inadequate alternatives like community-based classes or poor alternatives in the form of online education, including mobile phone-based learning (Azim Premji University, 2021) School closures were maintained for exceptionally long periods, that is approximately two years since the pandemic started. By the end of 2021, school days lost were well above two hundred—that's about a school year and a half. This prolonged interruption in learning could have grave long-lasting effects, particularly in middle income and poor countries (Gill and Saavedra, 2022). Just three months of missed schooling can result in 1.5 years of learning loss years later. This is the impact COVID-19 is having on school-aged boys and girls across the globe but unfortunately, for girls, this impact of education loss during and even after COVID-19 closures is even greater (Witter, 2021).

Eleven million girls, an alarming figure, might not return to school, turning back decades of progress toward gender equality, and more so, putting girls at higher risk for adolescent pregnancy, early and forced marriage and violence (Bhargava and Bhargava, 2022). Malala Fund research estimates that as a result of the pandemic, 20 million girls in developing countries may never return to the classroom (Witter, 2021). Encouragingly, by the end of 2021, schools had reopened in many countries but nearly one in four education systems were still closed and many systems had reopened only partially. 1.5 billion children were back in class, though 300 million kids still need to be brought back to school safely. But that was before the Omicron variant of the virus. These numbers have changed since the start of this year (Gill and Saavedra, 2022).

THE ROAD TO GENDER EQUALITY

2020 should have been a year of celebration for girls, the 25th anniversary of the 'Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action', considered, to date, to be the most progressive roadmap for gender equality, but unfortunately, it did not happen. Due to COVID-19, gender inequality has been more exacerbated. In 1995, the Beijing Conference concluded with a vision that every girl and every woman should exercise and know their rights. This agreement between 189 states to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women everywhere has sadly been unfulfilled to date as we still remain far from the target and in the post-pandemic period, it seems to be more difficult (Aide et Action, 2020).

THE EDUCATION SYSTEM IN INDIA

Universal and compulsory education for all children in the age group of 6-14 was a cherished dream of the new government of the Republic of India. This is evident from the fact that it is incorporated as a directive policy in article 45 of the constitution. But this objective remains far away even more than half a century later. However, in the recent past, the government appears to have taken a serious note of

this lapse and has made primary education a Fundamental Right of every Indian citizen (Kumar, 2022). Article 28 of the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' applies to children under 18, also recognises education as a legal right to every child based on equal opportunity and guarantees free compulsory primary education for all. Education in India is provided by public and private institutions. Public institutions are run by the government of India. The majority of students study in government schools where students from vulnerable communities study for free until the age of 14 as they can't afford the high fee structure of private schools. The government of India has taken the initiative to upgrade the education system in India by passing the Right to Education Act (RTE). It is an Act of the Parliament of India enacted on 4 August 2009, which describes the modalities of the importance of free and compulsory education for children between 6 and 14 in India under Article 21A of the Indian Constitution (Kaur, 2021).

STATUS OF GIRL'S EDUCATION BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

Indeed, India has made significant progress in universalizing primary education by improving the enrolment and completion rates of girls in primary and elementary schools, the challenge now lies with secondary education as the dropout rate of adolescent girls is higher at the secondary level (19.8%) than primary (6.3%) (Sonawane, 2021). However, the gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary schools for girls for the period 2008-2012 was merely 55.9% (Kaur, 2021). In the 2011 census, the female literacy rate in India was 65.2 per cent and the school dropout rate for girls was 52.2 per cent (Chaudhary, 2021). The female literacy rate for the age group of 15-24 years was 74.4% from 2008 to 2012. 47% of girls are married before the legal age of 18 and dropout rates increase alarmingly in classes III to V; 50% for boys and 58% for girls (Kaur, 2021). In 2008, more than 20 per cent of 15-16 year old girls were not enrolled, declining significantly to 13.5 per cent in 2018 and this year, for the first time, the

dropout rate for females was lower than males at the primary and secondary levels (Chaudhary, 2021). Further, while the net enrolment ratio of girls in elementary schools during the last decade is 91.58%, it declines as they grow older with 52.57% for secondary and 31.42% for higher secondary. Adolescence, a period between the ages of 10 – 19 years, is a critical stage in every girl's life marked by a decision to either transition to secondary school, enter into the labour market, or get married (Sonawane, 2021). Interestingly in India, the highest drop-out rates are seen in classes 8 and 9, around the age when a girl hits puberty (Kaur, 2021). Girls, especially from poorer households, face multiple challenges in completing their education. These barriers are a combination of demand-side and supply-side factors including economic, household level, school level, and cultural reasons (Sonawane, 2021). The reasons cited for the high dropout rate included the high cost of education, household or subsistence labour, desire to work, early marriage, school accessibility, safety, sanitation concerns in schools and a lack of interest in studies. Along with the legislation of 'The Right to Education' in 2009, a declining poverty rate, expanding school infrastructure, changes in social attitudes and several initiatives have increased enrolments over the last decade including the 'Swachh Bharat Mission', 'Jal Jeevan Mission', 'School Chalo Abhiyaan' etc (Chaudhary, 2021).

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON GIRL'S EDUCATION

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted children's learning around the world. UNESCO reports that over 89 per cent of the total population of students in 185 countries and 320 million students in India are actually out of school due to COVID-19 closures. This is 1.54 billion children and young people, including nearly 743 million girls, enrolled in school or university. In the least-developed countries of the world, over 111 million of these girls still struggle to get an education (Kaur, 2021). In India, COVID-19 has most impacted the education of rural and young

children as the schools were shut down following the national lockdown from March 16, 2020, erasing the progress of seven decades made through proactive programs and legislations including the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan or Education for All (2000) and the Right to Education Act (2009) (Save the Children, 2022).

In India, one in three children in classes I and II (grades 1 and 2) have never attended an in-person class during the pandemic, with the youngest learners having the least access to technology, according to the 2021 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). Of 15 states and union territories, an August 2021 survey from the School Children's Online and Offline Learning (SCHOOL) found that only 8% of rural children were studying online regularly and 37% were not studying at all. Nearly half of the children in the sample were illiterate (Bhargava and Bhargava, 2022). As per a longitudinal study (Rapid Needs Assessment - round 1 and 2) of some major states in 2022 by 'Save the Children', nearly half of urban (44 per cent) and one-third of rural households (34 per cent) reported that their children were playing without learning. Two out of five households reported that their children did not receive any kind of support either from school or from the education department. In addition, 14 per cent did not own a smartphone or required internet. The study also highlights that only a third (33%) of girls in India attended online classes during the COVID-19 lockdown compared to 39% of boys, raising concerns that progress in addressing gender inequalities in education in recent decades could be reversed (Save the children, 2022).

School Closures Increased Dropout Rates and Reduced the Learning Opportunities for Girls

Though it is too early to grasp the full scope of learning loss or dropout due to COVID-19 school closures, what is clear is that going to school is essential for the well-being of all learners as schools are places where learners enjoy social interaction and receive emotional support (UNESCO, 2021). Countries all over the world have implemented nationwide school closures to combat the pandemic,

impacting over 1.5 billion children and youth, half of whom are girls (Chandra and Gandhi, 2020). Another estimate is that at its peak in 2020, COVID-19-related school closures affected more than 1 billion learners around the world (Kwauk et al., 2021). The Malala Fund found that due to COVID-19, more than 20 million girls (from pre-primary to upper secondary) are at risk of dropping out and may never return to school (Pfunye and Popoola, 2021). UNESCO estimates that 11 million girls around the world are at risk of never returning to school (Aide et Action, 2020). Research conducted by Plan International in 14 countries found that girls are more likely than boys to drop out of school (Goulds et al., 2020, Save the Children, 2022). For girls in marginalized communities across the globe, these effects can be even greater. 20 million girls could potentially be out of school even when this pandemic is over, and many more will have lost out on months of learning (Witter, 2021).

According to a policy brief issued by the Right to Education Forum in January 2021, 10 million girls in India could drop out of secondary school due to Covid-19 (Suman, 2021). Populous states such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan have lower female literacy rates than the national average. The risk of girls dropping out during the pandemic is higher in these states (Chaudhary, 2021). A survey conducted by the Right to Education Forum, in collaboration with the Centre for Budget and Policy Studies and Champions for Girls' Education, in five states reveals similar findings. More than half (54 per cent) of the girls were uncertain about returning to their school after the pandemic; 64 per cent of girls were pulled into care and domestic work whereas 78 per cent of boys were spending time on leisure (Kwauk et al., 2021, Save the children, 2022). According to UNICEF, missing out on school even if only for a few weeks, can lead to negative outcomes that can last a lifetime for marginalized children (Aide et Action, 2020). A Save the Children survey indicates that 8 out of 10 children surveyed in 37 countries reported that they have learned very little or not at all since the onset of COVID-19. At least one-third of the

world's school children cannot access remote learning (Witter, 2021). One hundred and thirty-one million students ranging from pre-primary (ages 3 through 6) to upper secondary (ages 14 through 18) education in 11 countries fully missed at least three-quarters of classroom instruction time from March 2020 to September 2021. With these partial school closures and disruptions in home life, over 100 million additional children will fall below the minimum proficiency level in reading (Bhargava and Bhargava, 2022).

Gendered Access to Technology in the Wake of Digital Learning

Several schools across the world have transitioned to online platforms since the outbreak of the pandemic (Chandra and Gandhi, 2020). To continue the classes, even during a pandemic, the entire school system shifted to digital mode, though the teaching-learning process on digital platforms is not equitable to face-to-face education mode (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). However, 2.2 billion people (two in three children and young people aged 25 years or less) lack an internet connection at home. Internet coverage is alarmingly scarce in low-income countries: 6% coverage compared to 87% internet coverage in high-income countries. Globally, three out of four students who can't be reached by remote learning opportunities come from rural areas and/or poor households, which further exacerbates existing inequalities in access to education (Bhargava and Bhargava, 2022). The girls don't have equal access to online learning. The boys have 1.5 times the probability of owning a phone in low and middle-income countries than girls. The likelihood of owning a smartphone with internet connectivity is 1.8 times higher (Kaur, 2021). For a country like India, online schooling is a near-impossible step for 67% of the population that lives in rural areas and only half have access to the Internet. Availability of electricity is a significant challenge to taking advantage of education online (Kaul, 2021). However, if we talk about girls, the stark gender digital divide is preventing them from getting access to online education. For instance, in India, women comprise only 30% of the total internet users. This makes it

harder for girls to attend online classes and continue their education (Chandra and Gandhi, 2020).

Digital inequalities were already high among girls, women and other marginalised groups before COVID-19 but as the pandemic moved many aspects of daily life online, these inequalities have increased dramatically (Goulds et al., 2020). Only 23.8 per cent of Indian households had internet access in the 2017-18 National Sample Survey. Only 14.9% had access in rural households (66% of the population), and in urban homes, only 42% had access. Yet men are the biggest users: 16% of women, compared with 36% of men, had access to the internet. Youth have even less access: only 12.5% of students have access to smartphones (Kaur, 2021). As classes shifted online, girls in India were more likely to miss them because boys have preferential access to the internet and personal devices. Normally they are not allowed to have their own mobile phones, as this is a way to control and police their behaviour and keep them in check. We live in a patriarchal society, where the control over resources lies in the hands of males, even if they are younger (Gahlaut, 2021, Bansal and Shukla, 2020). Many girls said that they had hardly studied anything during the school closures because they only have one smartphone at home and they have to share it with their brothers. Whenever they turn to study from a smartphone, the daily limit of mobile data gets exhausted (Suman, 2021).

Simultaneously, those who were attending the online classes were not being provided with quality reading material through the online medium or they were unable to understand things properly. Those who could not afford online classes or whose schools had not taken any initiative for online classes, had not been provided with the books or reading material by their school to self-study at home (Kaur, 2021). For tribal populated areas like Chhattisgarh, Odisha and Jharkhand, exclusion from learning through online mediums happened because of low network connectivity in remote locations and poor digital literacy. Even though the government started several schemes like classes on TV or online, the feedback was that the girls could not really

understand what was happening in those lessons and there was no one to turn to for additional help (the majority of these low-income girls were first generational learners) (Gupta and Shaikh, 2021).

Loss of Learning During the Lockdown

Studies across the world have clearly indicated that school closures have a significant negative impact on the learning levels of children, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds, especially girls being affected more severely (Azim Premji University, 2021). Being out of school for that long means that children do not just stop learning, they also tend to forget a lot of what they have learned in the previous class (Gill and Saavedra, 2022). It includes the ability to read with understanding, the ability to write, and the ability to perform basic mathematical operations like addition and multiplication. This regression further compromises new learning since these abilities are foundational to all further learning (Azim Premji University, 2021). In late 2020, the World Bank estimated that a 7-month absence from schools would increase the share of students in 'learning poverty' from 53 to 63 per cent. It is found that after a year without in-person classes, students had learned 27 per cent less than what they would have learned in normal times (Gill and Saavedra, 2022). A field study by Azim Premji University in 2021 on the loss of learning due to COVID-19 closures revealed that 92 per cent and 82 per cent of children in grades 2-6 lost at least one ability in language and mathematics respectively, over the previous year (Azim Premji University, 2021). The same is in the case of girls; the longer they were out of school, the higher the risk of learning loss. A global study titled "When schools shut: Gendered impacts of COVID-19 school closures" by UNESCO has pointed out that from April to September 2020, the share of girls reporting that they did not study at all increased from 1 to 10 per cent (The Hindu, 2021). India's Pratham, a well-regarded education NGO, has also found that the minimum proficiency levels of children have been cut by half in the country due to school closures (Gill and Saavedra, 2022).

Financial Crisis; An Obstacle in Access to Girls' Education Amidst the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the role of structural factors including poverty and low incomes as well as adverse social norms that contribute to children, and particularly girls, dropping out of school (Save the children, 2022). As economic situations worsen around the globe, particularly in low and middle-income countries, more and more parents are likely to be unable to pay for their children's school fees, uniforms or school materials (Witter, 2021). India's largest proportion of the population lives under the poverty line and their source of income is on a daily basis (Kaur, 2021). With job loss due to the lockdown, it becomes extremely difficult for the families to afford the lump sum school fees to continue the education of their children, especially the girl child, as there is no other source of income for the informal sector (Gahlaut, 2021). This will result in the girl child being made to drop out of school, as there is a tradition that if a family has a girl and a boy, they prefer the boy child to continue the education (Kaur, 2021). Moreover, girls also experience shame in repeating the same grade due to not being able to afford the school fees (Gahlaut, 2021).

Additional Household Work

Our homes are not gender-neutral spaces and the stereotypes are saturated in a way that women bear the most burden of domestic chores. The primary responsibility of a woman is still considered to be unpaid domestic care work. In many regions, the burden of domestic chores is also falling disproportionately on girls and adolescents on account of school closures during lockdowns (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). They face an unequal burden of unpaid care and housework as they are at home due to the closure of their schools or the permanent departure from their education (Kaur, 2021).

Gender-Based Violence

Girls who are out of school are also more at risk of falling prey to various forms of exploitation and the domestic violence is one of them (Aide et Action,

2020). Gender-based violence influences and shapes the women's experience of work and education, both in private as well as in public spaces (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). We have experienced a global spike in domestic violence described as the 'second pandemic.' Economic declines, unemployment and school closures are boosting sexual violence, exploitation, trafficking, child labour, child marriage, and other harmful practices against girls. Various studies showed that school closures increased the girl's vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse (Kaur, 2021). Other than engaging only in academics, schools also provided a safe space for children, especially girls. In schools, they have a lot of opportunities to talk to their teachers, peers, and friends (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). Schools also offer important social protection mechanisms including school meal programmes, health programmes, counselling and mental support for girls. Overall, school closures have left them at higher risk of neglect, abuse, exploitation and gender-based violence (Goulds et al., 2020).

Dropout Leading To Child Marriage

In addition to not being able to attend online classes and increased burden of household labour, the effects of the pandemic are life-altering for several girls in India, in the sense that many would never return to school and a halt in their education is making them susceptible to early marriage, child labour and sexual exploitation (Chandra and Gandhi, 2020). Eventually, girls and women seem to be fighting a double pandemic during the entire crisis, one that is affecting all of us in the form of coronavirus, and the other one exclusive for girls is child marriage or forced marriage, also termed as 'shadow pandemic' (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). Evidence on increases in child, early and forced marriage is mixed. Yet, the pressures related to COVID-19 and school closures may have led to less strict enforcement or relaxation of existing prohibitions on child marriage (UNESCO, 2021).

Obstruct the Nutritional Requirement

The COVID-19 pandemic has not only disrupted the learning of children but has led to the

discontinuation of school meals (Save the children, 2022). In India, all government schools provide cooked meals under the 'Mid-Day Meal Scheme' (MDMs) with nutritional requirements and age-graded calorific values. As India has the most malnourished children worldwide and considering the gendered nature of the food supply available to girls in households (as they are the last as well as the least taker of food), mid-day meals contribute to the fight against malnutrition and ensure that enrolled girls get at least one healthy meal a day. But due to the pandemic situation, the schools are closed and the girls are not even getting one proper meal a day (Kaur, 2021). Globally, school closures and the subsequent suspension of school meals are estimated to have affected nearly 368.5 million children worldwide (Save the children, 2022). In India, disruption of mid-day meals put close to 115 million children, worst of all Dalit and Adivasi children, at increased risk of malnutrition (Save the children, 2022). The Supreme Court of India, in March 2020, directed the state governments to ensure the supply of mid-day meals. However, a study by Oxfam found that 35 per cent of the children did not receive their mid-day meals. Similarly, a study by Save the Children in 2022 showed that 40 per cent of urban and 38 per cent of rural children were not receiving mid-day meals and one in every three households was not receiving a take-home ration (THR) (Save the children, 2022).

Impacts Beyond Learning: Variety of Mental Health Concerns

COVID-19 school closures impacted children beyond their learning, targeting their overall well-being. It has led to adverse mental health outcomes which further negatively affect their ability to participate in learning. This may have long-term impacts on their lives. A survey conducted by UNESCO revealed that children, worldwide, are still struggling with social isolation, access to learning and a lack of physical exercise, all of which affect their development (Bhargava and Bhargava, 2022). The coronavirus outbreak has created havoc in the lives of students as school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the whole education system online but it

cannot substitute for the immersive experience of school education. A student's overall psycho-social development takes place in the school that consists of social and challenging environments, engagement, communication, group work, value education, and play and relaxation time with peers. They learn and grow through the cycle of fun, play, art, music, sports and knowledge. In the absence of these, we are witnessing the biggest wave of sadness, confusion and anxiety amongst our children. Operating websites and appearing for examinations online has also led to a variety of mental health concerns among students including signs of depression, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), anxiety and stress (Kaul, 2021).

If we are talking about girls, in-person learning at school provides them more mobility than being locked down in their houses (Gahlaut, 2021). They are free from household and care work, they can play and engage in all sorts of activities, which provide them with a sense of belonging and encourages them to aspire (Bansal and Shukla, 2020). At school, they have more of an opportunity to make social ties and without this many girls expressed feeling aloof and experiencing emotional distress. Moreover, additional household work which they were expected to perform adds to the monotony of their daily routines (Gahlaut, 2021). COVID-19 has resulted in widespread loss of livelihood and parents have become reliant on their children, both boys and girls, to supplement their earnings but they are solely dependent on adolescent girls to take care of the household and younger siblings (Gupta and Shaikh, 2021). Apart from this, girls who are out of school fail to navigate mechanisms for social support, health and hygiene and programs such as sexual and reproductive health (Kaur, 2021).

FACTORS THAT STALLING IMPROVEMENTS IN GIRL'S EDUCATION DURING THE PANDEMIC

India's efforts to close the gender gaps in education were starting to pay off. Female literacy and enrolment went up, which are both tell-tale signs of the progress of girls' education. Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit, undoing 70 years' worth of growth (Rodriguez, 2020). Before COVID-19, the past 20 years saw the number of girls not enrolled in school drop by 79 million globally. This was a result of decades of efforts to get more girls into the classroom and to narrow the gender gap in access to education. But today's pandemic is putting all of that progress at risk (Witter, 2021). A report by Forbes India on July 13, 2020, points out that disruption of funding, school nutrition programs, access to schools (learning) and unemployment rates are the four main factors that pose challenges and prevent improvements in girls' education in India (Rodriguez, 2020, Save the children, 2022).

- Education is already underfunded in India — receiving just 3.3% of the 2020-21 Union Budget and Covid-19 is likely to exacerbate this further (HAQ 2021, Save the Children, 2022). Even this amount of resource allocation for education is under strain because of the pressure to divert resources for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (Save the Children, 2022). Even if education's share of the national budget remains the same during the post-pandemic, lower GDP could lead to reduced public revenue, leaving India with proportionally lower funds for education (HAQ, 2021). Over the past four years, nearly a third of corporate social responsibility investments were made in education, but during the Pandemic, they are being redirected toward the COVID-19 response (Rodriguez, 2020).
- School-provided meals have helped keep girls in school by reducing the cost of schooling and girls' nutrition. Without the perk of free meals, families might choose to take their daughters out of school during school shutdowns, causing higher dropout rates and less re-enrolment. The Supreme

Court ordered states to continue serving lunch meals, but only a few states have followed through (Rodriguez, 2020).

- While better access to schools for girls living in rural areas in India has curbed families' safety concerns about sending their daughters to learn, the pandemic highlights the digital divide continuing to put them at a disadvantage. Girls are less likely to have access to technology for remote learning and in rural areas, only 28% of women have access to technology while in urban areas 33% have access (Rodriguez, 2020).
- High unemployment rates are also discouraging women from continuing their education during the pandemic. In April and May alone, 12 million women lost their jobs — 9 million in rural areas and 3 million in urban areas — contributing to a 30% unemployment rate for women (Rodriguez, 2020).

RESPONSE BY THE GOVERNMENTS (CENTRAL AND STATE) AND PRIVATE PLAYERS

To curb the impacts of the pandemic, Central and State governments have taken many initiatives that have addressed the needs for digitization of education, mid-day meals, addressing mental health issues, and incentives to address dropout rates of girls. For example, Andaman and Nicobar Island's Department of Education in collaboration with Doordarshan started online educational modules, especially for children; initiatives such as 'Kutty desk' in Kerala and Psycho-Social Support Centres called 'Snehi' counsellors help children with mental health issues. Specific to the needs of children and girls, the Government of Chhattisgarh started 'Mohalla Classes' that have been listed as the best practice by the Ministry of Education, Government of India. Women and Child Development Department in Gujarat and Maharashtra government has online modules of pre-school education for households; the Odisha government launched a state-wise

competition (MopratiBha) to engage children and the youth in creative pursuits during the lockdown. Odisha government had declared 3 months of free mid-day meal coupons to children. Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and many other states initiated promoting children without exams from classes nursery to the eighth standard to address the issue of high dropout rates, especially for girls (Save the children, 2022). For the children of rural areas who have been left behind in studies due to school closures, 'Asar' and 'Pratham' institutions have started summer classes in 40 districts of Uttar Pradesh in the current year (2022). These classes started on May 9 and will continue till June 15. The cooperation of local youth is being taken through village panchayats to educate the children. Classes of one or two hours are being held in such public places of villages, where everyone can easily gather and the target is to educate 1.50 lakh children across the state (NBT, 2022). In the sphere of education, private companies (Zoho, BYJU's, Swayam Prabha) have been involved in offering technology solutions, free classes for students, and education on 'direct to home' channels (Save the children, 2022).

DARK SIDE OF THE AUTHORITIES

Apart from these initiatives, there was even some lack on the part of various authorities as the government has not taken any constructive approach to help the vulnerable ones and their families. From the field study, it was found that there have been no initiatives from the educational department of concerned authorities towards continuing the education of the children from home. This has largely affected the education of the girls as they have no medium to continue their education from home (Kaur, 2021).

RETURN TO SCHOOL

Data on school returns are still limited, yet gender disparities have emerged in available data. More girls appear to be at risk and the prominent barriers to their return include poverty, domestic and

income-generating tasks, concerns about learning loss and falling behind, transitions to adulthood including marriage and pregnancy, and concerns about health and safety. A wide range of countries developed school reopening and recovery plans. Many countries supported campaigns such as the 'Learning Never Stops' campaign to promote a return to school, particularly for girls. Cash transfers were a common intervention to ensure that girls return to school (UNESCO, 2021). Back-to-school campaigns and active outreach services would be helpful to encourage parents to send their children back to school (Fancy, 2020).

FORMULA FOR SAFE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS

Plans to re-open schools should be gender-responsive and need to ensure a supportive environment for girls to return to school (Save the Children, 2022, Gill and Saavedra, 2022). School infrastructure must ensure proper water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, especially gender-specific toilets (Save the Children, 2022). Preparations to reopen schools also have to consider that not all children will be going back on an equal footing. Some will have struggled to learn in lockdown more than others and will be reliant on remedial education to catch up with any lost learning (Fancy, 2020). An appropriate strategy must be a blend of reopened schools, remote learning and remedial programs, that can limit the damage caused by the disruptions and serve as a model response for future shocks. Investments in technology have to be cleverly coupled with investments in learning skills. This is not the last pandemic or natural disaster that might force schools to close. By facilitating the continuation of the learning process at home, better learning technologies in the classroom can also make the system more effective both when schools are open and when they have to be closed (Gill and Saavedra, 2022). Supplemental support, whether in the form of bridge courses, extended hours, community-based engagements and appropriate curricular materials,

will be needed to help children gain the foundational abilities when they return to school (Azim Premji University, 2021).

POLICY RESPONSES TO MITIGATE THE GENDERED IMPACT OF COVID-19 IN GIRL'S EDUCATION

Neither this pandemic would be the last global health crisis we face, nor the future course of this crisis and prospects of new or additional school closures are certain. It is unclear which of the trends (both the positive and negative) that have emerged thus far will be sustained through repeated school closures and successive waves of COVID-19 variants (Kwauk et al., 2021). An example of this is the recent outbreak of the Omicron variant in the starting month of 2022 and the closure of schools for almost a month in various states of India. So we must prioritize strengthening the resilience of education systems and building the capacity to deliver quality education remotely, targeting vulnerable and marginalized children who are often overlooked (Bhargava and Bhargava, 2022). These require a holistic response and the engagement of all stakeholders; governments, bilateral and multilateral organizations, civil society, the private sector, academia, young people, families, caregivers and communities (UNESCO, 2021). For this, the Central and State governments should factor the following into their COVID-19 education response and recovery plans:

Develop Strategic Plans for the Educational Recovery

The central and state governments should:

- Establish systems to monitor girls' re-enrolment as mandated by the National Education Policy (NEP) and make this data publicly available.
- To reduce the economic burden on parents and retain the poorest girls in school, decrease the cost of schooling for them through the provision of scholarships,

incentives, targeted cash transfers, and waiving off examination fees as per the 2020 NEP mandate.

- Make secondary education free for girls with immediate effect.
- Provide remedial tuition and counselling support, especially to girls transitioning between primary and secondary levels, from marginalised communities, tribal areas and those in community schools as per the NEP.
- Revive Mid-day Meals (MDM) on an urgent basis with adequate and safe logistical arrangements to deliver nutritious meals. It is critical to bring children back to school not just for their educational needs but also for their health and nutritional needs.
- Bring more children back to school through educational aids and counselling especially within SC/STs community as the female enrolment ratio has always been low and the greatest impact would be felt by females on the edge of dropping out.
- Make provisions for home visits by educational representatives including teachers to motivate girls to re-register in the school.

Develop a Resilient, Equitable and Gender-Responsive Education System

The central and state governments should:

- Incorporate comprehensive sexuality education into the curriculum to mitigate risks of rising sexual violence and abuse during emergencies.
- Hire and train more female teachers to promote increased girls' enrolment and retention.
- Develop teachers' awareness and understanding of the gender dimensions of pandemics, as well as their capacities to integrate a gender lens into their teaching practice.

- Ensure gender-responsive plans to re-open schools and a supportive environment for girls to return to school.
- School infrastructure must ensure proper water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities, especially gender-specific toilets.

Equal Access to Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Remote Learning

The central and state governments should:

- When schools have to shut unexpectedly during the academic year, ensure the provision of a range of remote learning options, including no-tech and low-tech solutions, that take into account gendered inequalities in digital access.
- Make efforts to reach learners who are most at risk of being left behind, in particular, those marginalized by gender-based discrimination and inequality.
- Build online pedagogy, content, resources and platforms that can bridge learning gaps and enable digital literacy options for low income and marginalised girls.
- Design and develop diverse distance learning material using radio, TV, SMS, printed material, peer-to-peer and parent resources, which reach girls equitably.
- Also, ensure equitable access to teaching-learning materials for vulnerable children with a special focus on girls.
- Provide appropriate support and training to teachers to deliver quality, gender-responsive remote learning interventions, with particular attention to the girls with domestic and caregiving responsibilities.
- Also, train the teachers and schools to provide gender-responsive remedial and 'catch-up' programmes with a special focus on those who were unable to participate fully in remote learning.

Prevent School Dropouts and Ensure the Return to School: Particularly of the Most Vulnerable

The central and state governments should:

- Release funds to schools to enable them to reopen and stay open while maintaining COVID-19 safety protocols.
- Collect gender-disaggregated data to check progress on re-enrolment, performance, attendance and participation in remote learning. Officials at the block and district levels as well as School Management Committees, Mothers Groups, and Anganwadi Development Committees can play a key role in these efforts.
- Establish an attendance tracking mechanism at the school level to identify frequent absenteeism and track children with a focus on girls to bring them back to school.
- Reduce barriers to school re-enrolment, in particular for girls and other children facing gender-based obstacles to full participation.
- Raise awareness of the importance of participation in schooling among the hardest-to-reach populations within local communities, especially local women, youth and family organizations.
- Design back-to-school campaigns to ensure that girls return to school.

Keep Finances Flowing into Education Systems and Ensure it Benefits Girls Equally

The central and state governments should:

- Ensure education's share of national and state budgets reaches 6% of GDP as mandated by the NEP.
- Ensure that education financing is gender-responsive and operationalise the NEP's Gender Inclusion Fund to support school reopening and girls' re-enrolment in the immediate term.
- Multiple organisations have to work together at block and district levels to solve for increased financial burden, digital literacy and nutrition.
- Increase funding for research into viable online education and learning models,

including digital skills development and remote learning, that reach the most marginalized girls.

- Prioritise investing in appropriate low-tech, affordable and gender-responsive distance education methods, so that distance education is accessible to all.

Safeguard the Health and Well-Being of All Learners

The central and state governments should:

- Within the school reopening plan, ensure adequate mental health support is available for all children, particularly those who become infected and are at risk of facing stigma.
- Develop the capacities of teachers and school administrators to better identify and address the gendered repercussions of school closures on the broader health and well-being of learners.
- Ensure and equip schools to provide comprehensive psychosocial wellbeing support to combat the impact of COVID-19 on children.
- Take initiative for appointing trained counsellors in schools to hold in-person sessions or virtual sessions with students to be concerned with that psychosocial wellbeing support.
- Work with communities to develop appropriate psychosocial support programmes that take account of COVID-19 and possible future pandemics and build resilience and leadership.
- Ensure the gender-specific needs that are not being met directly by government programmes such as health and sex education, social and emotional learning, violence prevention and response, and counselling are addressed through other channels.
- Ensure a strong child protection safety net as mandated by the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS) across all village

and block Child Protection Committees (VLPCs and BLCPCs) to safeguard girls from child marriage, child labour or abuse.

CONCLUSION

Girls' education is an important factor in economic development as GDP increases with female education. A reversal of India's progress will bring long-term adverse developmental impacts unless greater action is taken (Chaudhary, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the unprecedented and unanticipated educational emergency. Children have lost close to two full academic years. While online teaching has filled the gap, the large digital divide has placed children, especially girls from poor communities at a severe handicap. Only a well-crafted alternative education strategy backed by adequate financial and human resources can put India back on track to attain its educational goals and prevent the loss of girls' education from becoming a generational loss (Save the children, 2022, Fancy, 2020). Governments and their partners, therefore, have a responsibility to address the gender dimensions of the pandemic by ensuring schools have the resources, and teachers have the skills, to help girls re-engage with their education. This will help to identify gender gaps and create opportunities to develop systemic, sustainable solutions that will reduce inequality not just in education systems but ultimately in society as a whole (Fancy, 2020).

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